

**Elfriede Jelinek's *Die Schutzbefohlenen*:  
A chorus of complaints on human rights catastrophes**

**I. Refugees**

*Twenty-eight fugitives escaping from the eastern shore of Maryland* is a painting that was published in 1872 in the book *The Underground Railroad* (Philadelphia, Porter & Coates, 1872), written by William Still. William Still lived in Philadelphia, where he was chairman of the Vigilance Committee of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society. He aided fugitive slaves by means of the so-called *Underground Railroad* and kept records of their lives in order to help families reunite after slavery was abolished.

Elfriede Jelinek's theater text *Die Schutzbefohlenen* begins with that image. First published in internet on June 14<sup>th</sup>, 2013, the text was later modified by herself in November 2013 and again in November 2014. Jelinek, who was born in 1946 in a small Austrian village, had her literary breakthrough in 1975 with *die Liebhaberinnen*, a marxist-feminist caricature of a homeland-novel. Since then, Jelinek writes against drawbacks in both public-political and private live – mainly, but not only of the Austrian society: *Babel* (2005) for example is a theater text on the war in Iraq and the Abu Ghraib torture and prisoner abuse. In 2004, she was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for her »musical flow of voices and counter-voices in novels and plays that, with extraordinary linguistic zeal, reveal the absurdity of society's clichés and their subjugating power.«<sup>1</sup> Considering the literature market of the German speaking countries to be extremely bankrupt and nepotistic, she decided recently to publish her writings exclusively on her own website.<sup>2</sup>

The flash point that motivated Elfriede Jelinek to write *Die Schutzbefohlenen* were some occurrences taking place in Austria between December 2012 and March 2013, when a group of 70 refugees and asylum seekers occupied the Votiv Church in Vienna. Most of the people faced execution upon deportation to their homeland. Many of them were due to be deported from Austria in summer 2013. Occupying a church in the city of Vienna, they wished to draw attention to their plight. Their protest was addressed to the inhuman situation in a big refugee camp next to Vienna: they claimed for better translators, for working permission, for education for their children and for a stop of the very arbitrary and constantly changing camp rules. Negotiations with the Ministry of the Interior started, but remained without any result, and so 14 of the refugees start a 31-day lasting hunger strike.

These ongoing in Vienna was the starting point for Elfriede Jelinek to write a text on refugees, on asylum seekers, on the structural conditions of that what it means to flee. The refugee can be considered as a symptom of the time we live in: Edward Said wrote already in 1984 that »Our age, with its modern warfare, imperialism and the quasi-technological ambitions of totalitarian rulers –

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2004/](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2004/) (2015-06-01)

<sup>2</sup> <http://derstandard.at/1392686578986/Elfriede-Jelinek-Literaturbetrieb-extrem-korrupt> (2015-06-01)

is indeed the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass immigration.«<sup>3</sup> And in 1996, Giorgio Agamben formulates in his text *Beyond Human Rights* that »the refugee is perhaps the only thinkable figure for the people of our time and the only category in which one may see today [...] the forms and limits of a coming political community.«<sup>4</sup>

Jelinek modifies her text for the first time in November 2013 – one month after one of the most terrible shipwrecks in the middle sea: on October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013, 366 refugees die in front of the Italian island of Lampedusa, most of them escaping from Eritrea and Somalia. This human tragedy results in the formation of the refugee-rescue-program Mare Nostrum, which is though given up due to financial reasons after only a year of existence. In the following, the organization of the European borders FRONTEX founds the mission *Triton* that has first of all the function to protect the European borders. Compared to *Mare Nostrum*, *Triton* has restricted financial resources, and has no humanitarian mission. Today, more than a million of people wait at the Libyan coast for their transit to Europe. And new figures from the aid organization *Save the Children* say that nearly 43.000 refugees came between January and May 2015 on the sea route to Italy, amongst them 3.747 children; 2.727 out of the children come without their parents or family.

»Wir leben. Wir leben. Hauptsache, wir leben, und viel mehr ist es auch nicht als leben nach Verlassen der heiligen Heimat.«<sup>5</sup> With these words, Elfriede Jelinek's *Die Schutzbefohlenen* begins.

## II. Rhizomatic bracings

It was on the occasion of a theatre festival in Japan in 2012, where one of her plays was staged, that Jelinek pick up the image of the rhizome to describe the structure of her theatre texts. »Sie sind Rhizome, meine Stücke [...] überdeterminiert, weil ich nichts offen lasse, so wie der Bambus auch keine freie Stelle übrigläßt und sich überall ausbreitet, wo er etwas Erde vorfindet.«<sup>1</sup> Jelinek expresses her wish that people in Japan could gather something from the *Textgeflecht* and take it with them – just as Deleuze and Guattari demand for a rhizomatic writing and reading: »In einem Buch gibt's nichts zu verstehen, aber viel, dessen man sich bedienen kann. Nichts zu interpretieren und zu bedeuten, aber viel womit man experimentieren kann.«<sup>6</sup> Thus, it is on the reader, on the spectator, and finally also on the director, to find his or her own thread within Jelinek's rhizomatic art work, as it offers of a multitude of possible threads.

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<sup>3</sup> Edward Said, »Reflections on Exile«, in: *Granta 13*, Autumn 1984, p. 159.

<sup>4</sup> Giorgio Agamben, »Beyond Human Rights«, in: Agamben, *Means without End. Notes on Politics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2000, p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.a-e-m-gmbh.com/ej/fschutzbefohlene.htm> (2015-06-01)

<sup>6</sup> Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *Rhizom*, Berlin: Merve 1977. p. 40.

The rhizomatic structure of Jelinek's theatre texts is sustained by an intertextual approach. »Nicht die Autorin spricht über die Welt, sondern sie benützt Texte, die über die Welt sprechen,«<sup>7</sup> so Peter Weibel in an Interview on Jelinek's work. Jelinek works with semantic displacements, polysemies, and agglomerations of meaning. She enters and absorbs these texts, assembles them, continues writing them. This is Jelinek's particular approach: a dissection of the material through specific literary techniques. It is because of these techniques that her texts can be considered political, as Ulrike Haß explicates:

Was mithin die politisch, gleichsam öffentliche Arbeitsweise der Texte Jelineks genannt werden könnte – ihr antimimetisches Zitationsverfahren der unterschiedlichsten selbst schon öffentlichen oder besser: an die Stelle der Öffentlichkeit getretenen Diskurse – ist unter dem Titel ›Intertextualität‹ akribisch analysiert worden. Die entsprechende Theoriebildung zielt in Richtung der Autorschaft: Unterstreichung des auktorialen Ich, Durstreichung des Ursprungs, Mythendekonstruktion.<sup>8</sup>

In *Die Schutzbefohlenen*, Jelinek interweaves several images with her text: of people on their flight – be it a historic painting or be it a current press photo – and of the refugee protest in the Viennese Votiv church. Furthermore, at the end of the text, she mentions some writings that inspired her: Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time*, and finally the brochure that is distributed to people coming to Austria, *Living together in Austria*, with the aim to communicate the basic values of the republic: Human dignity is described as the basic principle of the state, followed by the principles freedom, the constitutional state, democracy, federalism and the division of powers. Jelinek extracts passages of this brochure, declines terms and interweaves them with the human tragedies happening in that very Austria and Europe, so that it comes to displacements of sense – which is not without a certain comical aspect in language: »wir sind Bauern gewesen, wir sind Ingenieure gewesen, wir sind Ärzte gewesen, Ärztinnen, Schwestern, Wissenschaftlerinnen, wir sind etwas gewesen, jawohl, was auch immer, und jetzt müssen wir dieser Broschüre folgen, die in mehreren Sprachen existiert, während wir nicht mal ein einziges Mal existieren dürfen.«<sup>9</sup> As theater critic Esther Boldt comments in occasion of the premiere of *Die Schutzbefohlenen* in Mannheim, Jelinek invoices collective memories and invokes the allegedly good spirits of the west named humanism, human rights and democracy, which – as she exhibits quite clearly – are valid exclusively for those who installed them.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Monika Meister: »Theater müßte eine Art Verweigerung sein.« Zur Dramaturgie Elfriede Jelineks, in: Dies: *Theater denken*, S. 276.

<sup>8</sup> Ulrike Haß, »Im Körper des Chors, Zur Uraufführung von Elfriede Jelineks EIN SPORTSTÜCK am Burgtheater durch Einar Schlee.« In: *Transformationen. Theater der Neunziger Jahre*. Theater der Zeit. Recherchen 2. Berlin 1999, S. 27.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.a-e-m-gmbh.com/ej/fschutzbefohlene.htm> (2015-06-01)

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=9574:die-schutzbefohlenen-nicolas-stemanns-jelinek-urauffuehrung-blickt-zur-eroeffnung-des-festivals-theater-der-welt-in-mannheim-auf-das-elend-der-anderen&catid=724&Itemid=100190](http://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=9574:die-schutzbefohlenen-nicolas-stemanns-jelinek-urauffuehrung-blickt-zur-eroeffnung-des-festivals-theater-der-welt-in-mannheim-auf-das-elend-der-anderen&catid=724&Itemid=100190) (2015-06-01)

Probably the strongest inspiration for *Die Schutzbefohlenen*, however, comes from Aeschylus, called the ›father of tragedy‹. It was Aeschylus tragedy *The Suppliants* (or *The Suppliant Maidens*), in Greek *Hiketides*, in German *Die Schutzfliehenden* – a more than 2000 years old drama on human rights and the situation of the woman – that Jelinek used as a source of inspiration for her own human rights drama. She connects passages of the antique text with the destiny of today’s refugees in a manner that a reinterpretation and a reversal become evident.

Aeschylus’ tragedy reflects the thinking of his time, as it represents an ideology that laid the fundament for an understanding of politics and democracy in Europe. In the figure of the ›Chorus‹, basic principles of the Greek polis and the attic democracy manifest themselves. Already the etymological roots of democracy as the sovereignty of the people refers to the significance of community. Polis is therefore first of all a representation of a community of the people. In his influential study *Being Singular Plural*, Jean-Luc Nancy specifies a triple frame of reference that our modern argumentation of the tradition we call ›occidentalk consults: philosophy as the shared experience of logos, politics as the opening of the city, and finally theater as the place of the symbolic-imaginary appropriation of collective existence.<sup>11</sup> The aesthetic experience offered by theatre was of substantial significance for the Greek polis. Its potential of re-presentation facilitated to go in distance to a mere presentation of both the political and the philosophical.

»Ich glaube an das Theater als politisches Medium«<sup>12</sup>, Jelinek stated in 1984. Her idea was not to bring common people on stage but those who act in a psychological manner: »Ich vergrößere (oder reduziere) meine Figuren ins Übermenschliche.«<sup>13</sup> With the years, however, Jelinek had been developing a particular theatre aesthetics that doesn’t follow a dramatic structure any more. Recently, she refuses any imitation of life, which should be implemented on stage through a specific textual structure: so-called ›Textflächen‹ stand for a total liquidation of individual speech: »Sie müssen sprechen, mehr brauche ich nicht. Sie brauchen vielleicht mehr, aber das ist mir wurst. Darum bin ich irgendwann auf diese transportable Fläche gestoßen [...] Es reden abwechselnd Personen, man weiß, wer sie sind, aber man weiß nicht, wer der ist, der grade spricht,«<sup>14</sup> so Jelinek in her essay on *Textflächen* in 2013. Characters dissolve in voices. As a consequence, it comes to an amplification of speech, a talking at cross-purposes.

### III. Staging *Die Schutzbefohlenen*: Theater as a political gesture

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<sup>11</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, p. 71.

<sup>12</sup> Elfriede Jelinek: »Ich schlage sozusagen mit der Axt drein.« In: *TheaterZeitschrift* 7 (1984), S. 14-16.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Elfriede Jelinek, *Textflächen*, <http://www.a-e-m-gmbh.com/ej/ftextf.htm> (2015-06-01)

Elfriede Jelinek's theatre texts had been considered to be un-actable for a long time. Over the years, this position changed gradually; Monika Meister explains a possible reason for that:

mittlerweile behaupten sie sich als höchst theaterwirksam, gerade weil sie in der Differenz zum konventionellen Theater einen Spiel-Raum konstituieren, in dem die Versuchsanordnungen der Jelinek als eminent theatrale Sprech-Partituren funktionieren. Sperrige, gegen jede dramatische Handlungskonvention gesetzte, insistierende Kunstfiguren eröffnen auf der Bühne vollkommen neue Perspektiven der szenischen Darstellung.<sup>15</sup>

Jelinek's theater texts are located within the terrain of a postdramatic approach, where the author provides – additionally to the theatre text – theoretical thoughts on its conception. For a transcription of her theater texts into a stage language, Jelinek adopts a democratic attitude: she invites stage directors to use her text thoroughly and thus to become co-authors. As a matter of fact, diverse co-authorships lead to diverse translations of Jelinek's *Textflächen* on a theater stage. So was the case with *Die Schutzbefohlenen*: the approach of Nicolas Stemann, who directed the debut performance of the play at the Thalia Theater in Hamburg (it premiered on September 12, 2014, and was also presented at the festival *Theater der Welt* in Mannheim, the *Holland Festival* in Amsterdam, and it was invited to the *Berliner Theatertreffen*), differs a lot from that of Michael Thalheimer's staging at the Burgtheater in Vienna that premiered on March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2015. Attached to both of these productions are the central questions: Who is speaking? And: Who is representing whom?

Nicolas Stemann developed new theatrical forms in his examination of Elfriede Jelinek's work over the last years. According to the website of the Thalia Theater, Stemann »stages this complex and moving text as a linguistically and visually powerful oratory, that in form and content confronts us with the aporia of the humanity Europe has never delivered.«<sup>16</sup> At the beginning of the performance, three white men stay on stage sight-reading the text, interrupting each other, speaking synchronously and against each other. By and by, their position as speakers is challenged through other actors: first a black man, later a black man and a white woman. Their struggle for resources starts taking place in real terms on stage, until the actors finally decide to join forces. Meanwhile, more and more people are taking place on chairs positioned in the rear area of the stage: it is a chorus of refugees, consisting of both Mannheim citizens and asylum seekers. In the course of the performance they will enter the center stage, start sight-reading their text, and finally merge to an anonymous mass colonizing the stage. In an interview with the magazine *Theater Heute*, Stemann constitutes his approach: »Als es dann darum ging, daraus eine Inszenierung zu machen, war es mir sehr wichtig, die Betroffenen, von denen das Stück handelt, nicht erneut auszugrenzen,

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<sup>15</sup> Monika Meister, »Theater müßte eine Art Verweigerung sein.« Zur Dramaturgie Elfriede Jelinek, in: Monika Meister, *Theater denken. Ästhetische Strategien in de szenischen Künsten*, Wien: Sonderzahl 2009, S. 275.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.thalia-theater.de/en/whats-on/repertoire/die-schutzbefohlenen/>

sondern ihnen zur Sichtbarkeit zu verhelfen. Sie mitspielen und ihre Stimme erheben zu lassen. Denn das ist ja auch genau ihr politisches Anliegen: sichtbar zu werden.«<sup>17</sup>

Stemann uses the method of black facing: »Natürlich ist Blackfacing rassistisch, aber muss man nicht gerade deshalb sagen, es gehört auf die Bühne?«<sup>18</sup> This is a very basic question for theater in general, so Stemann: why are there so little black actors in German theaters? And how are racist stereotypes unconsciously reproduced? »Mit meiner Form des Theaters hat das wenig zu tun: ein nicht-identitäres Theater, in dem ein Schauspieler, der spricht, nicht automatisch die Figur ist – im Gegenteil ich betone die Differenz.«<sup>19</sup>

The first impression at the beginning of Michael Thalheimer's staging of the *Schutzbefohlenen*, there is a huge cross shining forth above a stage full of darkness. Gradually, asylum seekers fall through the direct axes of the cross – directly in ankle-high water. It takes some time until the Chorus reaches position. »Wir leben. Wir leben. Hauptsache, wir leben, und viel mehr ist es auch nicht als leben nach Verlassen der heiligen Heimat«, resounds the collective of refugees.

Thalheimer's approach to *Die Schutzbefohlenen* stands in contrast to Stemann's, as he decided to have no refugees or asylum seekers on stage but to work exclusively with professional actors. »Ein Flüchtling auf der Bühne ist kein Flüchtling mehr«<sup>20</sup>, Thalheimer underlines, and further: »Die Flüchtlinge hatten ihr Leid schon. Wieso sollten sie uns ›Abendländern‹ auf der Bühne noch einmal erzählen, wie scheiße ihr Leben ist. Der Flüchtling auf der Bühne ist kein Flüchtling, er ist nicht mehr authentisch. Diese Art von missratener Pose hasse ich, ich lehne solch exhibitionistischen Porno ab. Die Bühne ist kein Zoo.«<sup>21</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann follows a very similar argumentation on this subject in his influential book on *Postdramatic theatre*: »That politically oppressed people are shown on stage does not make theatre political. [...] It is not through the direct thematization of the political that theatre becomes political but through the implicit substance and critical value of its *mode of representation*.«<sup>22</sup> Having in mind Nicolas Stemann's staging of *Die Schutzbefohlenen*, however, I find it necessary to add to Lehmann's argumentation: showing politically oppressed people on stage does in turn not make theatre unpolitical. There have been some projects recently staging or reading *Die Schutzbefohlenen* with refugees and asylum seekers, that, for sure – just as Stemann's approach – have the potential to be political. Being political though is not a question of

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<sup>17</sup> »Menschenrechte für alle? Wie leben wir eigentlich? Worauf basiert unser Wohlstand? Und worauf unsere sogenannten Werte? Der Umgang mit Flüchtlingen stellt das demokratische Westeuropa auf die Probe.« in: *Theater heute*, No. 2, February 2015, p. 24.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Ö1.

<sup>21</sup> »Die Bühne ist kein Zoo.« Interview Norbert Mayer (*Die Presse*) with Michael Thalheimer on the occasion of the premiere at the Burgtheater, 21. 03. 2015 ([http://diepresse.com/home/kultur/news/4690954/Thalheimer\\_Die-Buehne-ist-kein-Zoo](http://diepresse.com/home/kultur/news/4690954/Thalheimer_Die-Buehne-ist-kein-Zoo))

<sup>22</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, London: Routledge 2006, p. 178.

showing or deliberately not showing oppressed people, refugees and asylum seekers – its rather a question, as Lehmann emphasizes, of the critical value of its mode of representation.

#### **IV. Refugees**

On the Italian island of Lampedusa, Giacomo Sferlazzo has established a museum in commemoration of the people who died on their escape in the Mediterranean Sea. Visitors would see flotsam that came ashore with the refugees – objects of a shattering banality: a pocket Koran, shoes, music tapes with Arabic inscription, broken sunglasses, a mosquito spray, photographs, a pack of spaghettis from Libya. Fishermen of Lampedusa report: repeatedly, parts of dead bodies get caught in fishing nets, the batteries and tanks of sunken boats pollute the water.<sup>23</sup>

The deportation of people seeking help and the tragedies at Lampedusa expose Europe's cynicism and bigotry when it comes to human rights, which are, as it seems, applicable exclusively to those who can afford being part of Europe. This is what Jelinek reveals, what Jelinek exhibits with her ›political, almost public way of writing‹ (Ulrike Haß) in *Die Schutzbefohlenen*. In an ›age of the refugee and the displaced person‹ (Edward Said), Jelinek provides a theater text on refugees and asylum seekers that refers on current incidences, but has rhizomatic bracings to both images and texts from other times and places. »Wir sind gar nicht da. Wir sind gekommen, doch wir sind gar nicht da.« – these are the concluding words of the *Schutzbefohlenen*. The political potential of the text on stage, however, does not persist in a presence or absence of ›real refugees and ›real asylum seekers.

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.zeit.de/2015/25/lampedusa-fluechtlng-humanitaere-katastrophe/seite-2>